Bothy Culture. An ethical alternative to research mentoring

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I need to start by scratching where it itches. I have never liked the word 'mentee'. So much so that I struggle to utter it, even in contexts where its use is accepted and expected. Mentees sound like something you would find hanging near a supermarket checkout. Bite-sized chewy dragees offering a 'hit of delicious freshness which excites the mouth and awakens the mind.' So far, so good perhaps — until you consider that mentees are sucked down to the point of non-existence. Even that hard outer shell won't protect the mentee. A mentee is someone who is 'done to', with the result that the initial hit of delicious freshness may be short-lived. The dice are loaded. The odds are stacked against the mentee who languishes at the checkout counter. As we shall see, the gods are on side of the mentor.

Let's take a closer look at that word, especially as it was probably chosen for its etymological significance.[1] Mentor (with a capital M) was the name of the person celebrated in Greek mythology and in Homer's Odyssey as the person who offered guidance and counsel to Odysseus's son Telemachus. Odysseus had left for Troy when Telemachus was still in his infancy. Some 20 years later, the young Telemachus set out in search of his wandering father. Nowadays, the original Mentor might be described as a 'life coach'. That form of mentoring requires a serious investment of time. In the case of the beleaguered Telemachus who set sail from Ithaca it was almost certainly a matter of life or death. For the goddess Athena, it was quite

[1] The *Shorter Oxford Dictionary* records the first use of the word 'mentor' in 1750. The word is now used allusively as a common noun to someone who provides advice and acts as an experienced and trusted counsellor.

literally a transformative experience, as it was she who assumed the guise of Mentor and accompanied Telemachus to Pylos. For the young and inexperienced Telemachus, the roiling seas and a dark night of the soul, alleviated only by a soothing opiate provided by Helen of Troy, were what the philosopher Agnes Callard fittingly describes as an 'orientation towards something of intrinsic value'. His heart was set on defending the honour of his mother and being reunited with his father.

In the context of the contemporary university, mentoring can all too easily become a Trojan horse for *instruction*, that is to say 'how to achieve a goal that is itself instrumental to some (unspecified) goal'. Examples of the former might be publishing a journal article or being accredited for competence in teaching. Examples of the latter might include getting tenure or being promoted. This kind of advice is commonly dispensed by those judged to be experts at something or other. Mentors are those who are considered to have 'made it' in some way. They are located on the other side of the invisible line that separates them from the mentees hanging around at the checkout. Although they rarely achieve the status of mythological figures, mentors with a small 'm' inhabit the larger, more fertile islands on the edge of the archipelago. The mentee may become more successful in writing for publication, say. But they are unlikely to say 'I miss you' to that distant expert. Why is that so? Because advice in that carefully-curated, restricted sense is instrumental rather than personal. The ship in mentorship has set sail, and the mentee is not on board. Advice dispensed in this way does not bring about what my mighty companions and I refer to as 'a relation founded on receptive joy', across lines of difference. As Callard points out, you might get better at doing something that you already value, but you won't get any better at *valuing*. It is only by entering into a genuinely companionable relationship that you can be cued in 'to what's important, at an intellectual or physical or emotional level'.

Can we conceive of the mentoring relationship as a form of 'flourishing that unfolds in the moment and is nourished by community, conversation and the richness of differences?' The notion of bothy culture offers a truly pedestrian solution that invokes a coming together of strangers in a place of refuge. Everyone is just passing through, the young and the old, the callow and the wise. They make their way to this rudimentary place of shelter, often over rough and uneven ground and against a strong headwind. In a bothy you won't meet anyone who says 'this is my field' — or, worse still — who asks you what your field is. Here it is the land that prevails. This is a terrain where the right to roam is taken for granted. No one can claim the high ground. You will meet those intent on conquering a distant summit, and those who are content simply to be with the mountain. As Nan Shepherd has it, their talk is lit up by contact with the hill as it is salted in discussion with one another. Leave the bothy as you find it, with the bare necessities for collective life (candles and a box of matches perhaps, or some logs for a fire). The wet and the wildness will do the rest. 'Long live the weeds and the wilderness yet.'

References

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'A timely call for genuine companionship on the intellectual journey'.

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